

Spinster

SABINE PANZRAM

In premodern Mediterranean populations early marriage for women was the norm. Thus they were able to bear legitimate children during all or almost all of their peak reproductive period. This pattern is also found in Rome. Close studies of epitaphs from the Western Empire indicate that women generally married in their late teens, men usually in their mid-twenties, so that husbands were not infrequently some seven to ten years older than their wives. Much the same pattern is also found in the Egyptian census returns, as Bagnall and Frier (1994: 111–27) pointed out: women begin to marry at age twelve or thirteen, shortly following menarche; 60 percent or more have married by age twenty, and by thirty nearly all women are married or previously married. Thus maternity began soon after marriage; in Egypt, almost a quarter of all legitimate children were born to mothers under age twenty. Permanent female CELIBACY is rare or, as Frier (2000: 799) stated more exactly, “Rome had no spinster class.” Among others he refers to a survey of African epitaphs for women of marriageable age that showed that nearly 95 percent were or had been married; and of those who were evidently unmarried, half were still under age twenty-three. Thus the only way to live one’s life as an unmarried woman seems to have been to choose conversion into a cultic virgin.

In the form of sexual abstinence VIRGINITY led to a state of cultic purity, which may have been believed to be necessary to get in contact with a deity or fight off demons. It expressed a gain in power and increased the social status of those concerned. Virginity is different from chastity, insofar as chastity was not restricted to the sexual realm and included abstinence, for example, from certain food. Thus *castitas* belonged already to the ideal of virtue of the

Roman *matrona* (Livy 1.58.5; Plin. *Ep.* 7.19.4). In Rome, the priestesses of Vesta were obliged to keep their virginity for the time – thirty years – of their office (Plut. *Num.* 9–10). Any violation was considered an ill-omened event for the state and was punished by death: either they were pushed from the Capitol (Tarpeian Rock) or they were buried alive. However, this phenomenon can hardly be seen as the model for virginity in Christianity: celibacy for the sake of Heaven (Matt 19:10; Lk 18:29) was understood and attested as a grace of God by the apostles (1 Cor 7:7). The predominance over married and widowed people in the early church is attested by writings on virginity by Ambrose and Augustine among others. Since the fourth century, there is evidence for virgins living within Christian communities by constituting a particular group, into which one is introduced by the ritual of being consecrated (blessing prayer by the bishop, handing over the veil). Parallels to blessing and veiling the bride are obvious. In the course of the increasing differentiation and institutionalization of the church, offices which had previously been occupied by women lost significance. A new field was opened up with the ascetic-monastic ways of life: abstinence now made ascetics of both sexes bearers of divine power (*virtus*).

SEE ALSO: Ascesis/asceticism; Family, Greek and Roman; Marriage, Greece and Rome; Vesta and Vestals; Women, Roman.

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